

The Leader of the Free World?

Frame, Gregory

Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television

Published: 18/10/2016

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Frame, G. (2016). The Leader of the Free World? Representing the declining presidency in television drama. In B. Kaklamanidou, & M. Tally (Eds.), *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as fiction* (pp. 61). (Routledge Advances in Television Studies). Routledge.

Hawliau Cyffredinol / General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The Leader of the Free World?
Representing the declining presidency in television drama
By Gregory Frame

This chapter represents a development of my research into the presidency in film and television, focusing primarily on the most recent examples of the institution's representation in popular culture. In my book, *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation* (2014), I came to the conclusion that mainstream film and television have, over the course of the past twenty-five years, become two of the presidency's most indispensable support mechanisms: in facing the complexity and intractability of many post-Cold War conflicts, and the hostile partisanship of domestic American politics, the presidency has revealed itself to be rather impotent. To varying degrees, however, film and television continue to shore up the impression that the president is an all-powerful superhero, able to bend the world to his will.

Since President Obama was elected in November 2008, popular cultural representations of the presidency have shifted once again, a development touched upon only briefly in the conclusion of my earlier book. In the fullness of time, it is clear that film and television are showing the office to be under even more strain, but in oddly contrasting ways. If anything, popular culture is finding it substantially more difficult to provide the necessary buttress to what is beginning to be the rather weatherworn construct of the heroic presidency. My intention here is not to determine whether the presidency is *actually* in decline in terms of its influence, but to demonstrate how popular cultural representations of the presidency are beginning to question whether there is any power in the office beyond its symbolic significance. In this chapter, I will explore Shona Rhimes' hit ABC drama, *Scandal* (2012-present) and Netflix's *House of Cards* (2012-present) as symptomatic of this impression that the presidency is in decline in its power and influence. Although these texts contrast wildly in terms of style and tone, both shows evince certain anxieties and uncertainties about the strength of the presidency in the contemporary period. While my concern here is primarily on these televisual representations, I will precede this analysis with a brief consideration of the 'president-in-peril' narrative in recent Hollywood cinema, as this a vital additional construct to understand the decline of the presidency in popular television. As with earlier popular cultural examples, many of these anxieties coalesce around particular questions and definitions of masculinity, which will also be explored.

It is practically a cliché to suggest these days that the United States is in decline as a global superpower. Following two disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the collapse of the economy, the failure to act against the imperialistic aggression of Russia, the barbarism of President Assad in Syria, and the muted response to the rise of ISIS across North Africa and the Middle East, it is apparent that the presidency, the symbolic (and often practical) manifestation of that power, no longer has the influence and reach that it once did. In 2013 and 2014, there were a slew of newspaper articles declaring the Obama presidency and, potentially, the presidency in general, to be in decline. Enormous defeats in the midterm elections in November 2014, which led to the Republican Party taking back the Senate, have further exacerbated this impression. As BBC journalist Mark Mardell suggested in September 2013, soon after the United States refused to involve itself militarily in the Syrian conflict, “Obama dithered over Syria, vacillated over the Arab revolutions, and has been tricked by the Russian president into not firing even a pinprick of American power.” Indeed, journalists for the past two years have rather clambered over themselves to describe the presidency, and American power in general, in these terms. It speaks to an apprehension about the changing nature of the world, in which there are various spheres of influence and many parties with a stake. For so long, we have looked to ‘The Leader of the Free World’ to resolve these contradictions and provide comfort, but in the current moment, such easy solutions appear frustratingly inaccessible and the presidency appears powerless to change the situation.

Many journalists have short memories. The problems Obama has experienced are in keeping with those suffered by the ‘postmodern presidency’. As Richard Rose (1991) suggested, the postmodern presidency can no longer dominate the international system in the way it once did, a phenomenon that stretches back at least the 1970s, when Carter struggled to fix the problems that left the United States beleaguered: the oil price rises, the taking of American hostages in Iran, the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. While the majority viewed these as *Carter’s* failings, a verdict which led to Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980, Rose suggested these problems were “less a reflection on the man in the Oval Office and more as symptoms of a structural shift” in the presidency (26-7). So rather than view Obama’s problems as a reflection of his skill as a leader, perhaps it is more instructive to consider his travails as further illustration of a structural shift within the presidency, or at the very least a continuation of the issues that plagued the ‘postmodern presidency’. Unlike the earlier period, however, popular culture no longer has the reverence for the presidency that it once did. When the modern presidency metamorphosed into its postmodern counterpart in the

early 1970s, its representation in popular cinema and television remained relatively respectful. Even films like *All the President's Men* (1976), which deal directly with presidential corruption keep the figure, and the office, at a distance.

A 'postmodern' presidency of sorts really only arrived in American cinema and television during Bill Clinton's tenure. However, Hollywood appeared unwilling at this stage to accept the decree that the postmodern presidency is by its very nature less powerful. Indeed, Hollywood reacted to this perceived 'lack' – the notion that, as Harold M. Barger suggested, "few Americans hold grand illusions any longer about what presidents can accomplish on the home front, and expectations for presidential leadership in foreign affairs have likewise declined" (1999, 58) - by simply reconstructing the heroic and noble president in a variety of guises: not shy of exploring the problems a president might face, be it intergalactic invaders in *Independence Day* (1996), asteroids in *Deep Impact* (1998), or simply a hostile Republican Party in *The American President* (1995) and *The West Wing* (1999-2006) these difficulties are still, ultimately, shown to be reconcilable. However implausible, success can be achieved and American hegemony restored, with the president entirely in charge of ensuring the protection of the nation. The men of militaristic strength and good character who populate the two strongest strains of fictional presidential representation in the 1990s – the action film and the romantic comedy – were indicative of the desire for the return of this more wholesome, more noble figure with *The West Wing* perhaps the most obviously romanticised and heroic counterpoint to the presidencies of Clinton and Bush Jr.

The presidential films of the 1990s also embraced the evolving nature of masculinity in the period, with a greater acceptance of softer, more family-orientated images in both action and comedy genres (as outlined by Susan Jeffords [1993, 196-208]). It is clear, however, that John Orman's "macho presidential style" (1987) remains a significant barometer of the selection and treatment of presidents (fictional and factual), inasmuch as a president's 'manhood', how it is defined, how he behaves, speaks, moves, and the role his wife plays in this equation, is obsessively raked over and discussed by the media and public alike. While what the public 'needs' appears to oscillate between hypermasculine frontiersmen (Bush Jr.) and softer, 'New Man' types (Clinton, Obama), the constitution of the president's masculinity remains vital, and the position he occupies along this spectrum – competitive, athletic, decisive, unemotional, strong, aggressive and powerful – is the source of much debate. It is obvious, too, based on my previous research, that fictional presidents are

thought of in similar ways, and the most recent examples suggest a struggle to conform to Orman's schema. In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss the ways in which the president in recent fiction has, possibly as a result in a perceived decline in the power and influence of the office, begun to embody archetypes previously unthinkable in the presidential imaginary.

Olympus Has Fallen and *White House Down*: The President as Damsel-in-Distress and Sidekick

The two new impulses in mainstream presidential fiction could be said to reflect the new realities – the never-ending 'war on terror' and the perilous state of the American economy after its collapse in 2008. The first of these impulses, which draws heavily on the conceptualisation of the office in television drama *24* (2001-10) that premiered in the months after 9/11, is the 'president-in-peril' narrative. While mainstream cinema has shown the president in danger in a variety of films, the narrative device becomes more frequent in the years following 9/11 and the success of *24*. *The Sentinel* (2006), *Shooter* (2007) and *Vantage Point* (2008) concern plots to kill the President of the United States. However, 2013 saw the crystallisation of this trend with the release of two particularly hyperbolic films that concern terrorist invasions of the White House. *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down* witness the invasion and destruction of the president's house (by North Koreans in the former, and a ragtag bunch of war veterans, survivalists and disgruntled secret service agents in the latter). It is clear that both films operate as part of a small number of post-9/11 films that offer fantasies of wish-fulfilment: in this realm, the individual hero *can* triumph over the terrorist threat, emphasising a desire to recapture the initiative and reassert a semblance of control that was lost on September 11th, 2001, and in the calamitous events that have followed.

It is crucial, however, that in both instances the president is the object of rescue, rather than, as in earlier films, the subject of the counterattack. Both films feature the capture or attempted capture of the president: in *Olympus Has Fallen*, President Asher (Aaron Eckhart) spends the majority of the film as a hostage requiring rescue by disgraced former Secret Service Agent Mike Banning (Gerard Butler), while *White House Down*'s President Sawyer (Jamie Foxx) proves himself slightly more capable of evading the terrorists' clutches and joins forces with Capitol Police Officer John Cale (Channing Tatum) who, in just one of the film's obvious allusions to *Die Hard* (1988), just happens to find himself in the White

House when the attack occurs. In placing the president in either the captive or the supportive role, both films emphasize doubts about the institution's ability to play the role of protector and defender of the nation. Despite the generic similarities between the two films, Asher and Sawyer in many ways represent the two sides of popular culture's presidential coin: where the former inherits many characteristics (though, crucially, not behaviours) from early heroic presidencies, the latter reveals many of the personal foibles commonly associated with Aaron Sorkin's leaders, like slightly eccentric behaviour and a weakness for cigarettes (particularly true of President Josiah Bartlet in *The West Wing*). Furthermore, there is a racial dynamic given Foxx's casting in *White House Down* that requires some further exploration.

Given the narrative thrust of *Olympus Has Fallen*, Asher's appearance (complete with improbably square jaw and dimpled chin) and bombastic rhetoric have a parodic quality that would perhaps be more convincing if the film's tone were not so earnest. Indeed, this analysis of the film's symbolism is reinforced by the fact that Asher spends the majority of the film as the captive of the North Korean terrorists, subjected to horrible beatings and threats to his life. In this sense, he more properly occupies the 'damsel-in-distress' archetype so common in the action genre: the film self-consciously borrows from *Die Hard* (and was marketed as such), and if one is to follow this narrative schema to its logical conclusion, it is difficult not to see Asher in the role of John McClane's wife in this instance (particularly given the troubled friendship between Banning and Asher that provides some of the narrative tension in the film's initial stages, as well as the fact that Asher is a widower). The film's conclusion is instructive in this regard: Asher, incapacitated by a bullet wound, having acquiesced to terrorist demands and handed over the nuclear launch codes that may destroy the whole country, is unable to reverse the operation and is reliant upon someone more heroic and capable in the shape of Banning. He also requires physical support as he hobbles out of the White House. The president is physically vulnerable, hands over his power and authority to others, but his survival remains paramount to the maintenance of the nation state. In this, *Olympus Has Fallen*'s remoulding of the *Die Hard* template, enthusiastically exploited in presidential fiction by *Air Force One* (1997), betrays the contemporary period's anxiety about the state of the presidency: where the latter film featured Harrison Ford as President James Marshall in the heroic role, rescuing his wife and daughter from terrorists (reinforcing the Reaganite 'macho' presidency), *Olympus Has Fallen* relegates the president to the object of rescue. He is not the active agent any longer, although, as evidenced by the jingoistic imagery that greet his safe rescue at the end of the film, he retains his symbolic significance.

The dynamics of *White House Down* are somewhat different, given that the generic template from which the film is drawn can be more readily associated with the interracial ‘buddy’ action/comedy popularised in the 1980s and 1990s through the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987-98), with President Sawyer relegated to the sidekick role. As Cynthia J. Fuchs (1993) has argued, the politics of the interracial buddy movie unite white and black with the intention of uniting Americans against an invading ‘other’ (in the case of *White House Down*, a group of Americans that have established themselves on the fringes of society as an external, violent threat to the political order) (197). In essence, in joining forces against this invading ‘other’, the ‘buddy’ formula provides a fantasy resolution to a past blighted by racial conflict. The power dynamics do not, however, become equal. As Ed Guerrero (1993) has argued, blackness is “contained” by the ‘buddy’ formula, relegated to the role of serving the more heroic white male, or providing the object of rescue because he is incapable of looking after himself: the example most commonly cited in this instance is Murtaugh (Danny Glover) sitting on a toilet that is about to explode in *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), dependent upon Riggs (Mel Gibson) to save him. Murtaugh is also somewhat incompetent with weaponry, not being able to fire his gun straight (if at all). This construct carries over to the characterisation of President Sawyer in *White House Down*, who proves himself incapable of firing a rocket launcher accurately while engaged in a high-speed pursuit with the terrorists on the White House lawn. Sawyer’s weaknesses are played for laughs, such as his furious chewing of nicotine gum (an apparent nod to Obama’s battle to give up smoking). Crucial to the film’s narrative, however, is the fact that he also never served in the military, which is considered to be a blot on his masculine copybook. Full control, masculine authority and power are reserved for the typically muscle-bound white hero, who embodies many of the characteristics necessary in the masculine schema: physical strength, tactical skill and the ability to improvise.

Indeed, although both *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down* conclude with the restoration of order, and the return of the president to his position of power and control, it is clear that while the position still has enormous symbolic value, its power to control the universe has been diminished. Presidents Asher and Sawyer cannot save themselves: the protection of the president’s life and the ultimate restitution of social order falls to the other figures more heroic than him. This shift in emphasis away from conventionally heroic presidents is a vital contextual framework in order to understand how television has begun to imagine the presidency as sometimes more marginalised, much weaker and more fallible.

The 'Irrelevant President': *House of Cards* and *Scandal*

This second impulse has emerged most prominently in television: the 'irrelevant president' narrative, arguably an extrapolation and expansion of the 'president-in-peril' narrative in film, explores the notion that the figure of the president is, more or less, insignificant in the day-to-day operations of government, despite retaining symbolic significance. Another key component of this narrative is that, in contrast to *The West Wing*, the president is not a uniquely 'brilliant' or exceptional individual, and has required a significant amount of help – often illegal – to secure the position he holds. *House of Cards* has much invested in its appearance as the anti-*West Wing*. This is immediately apparent from its title sequence, which shows a city founded upon noble ideals, its self-confident and self-righteous image rendered in marble, being quickly consumed by shadow. Cloaking the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument in darkness suggests we should be wary of, rather than enamoured with, these potent symbols of American democracy. The music, in radical contrast to the brash patriotism of *The West Wing*'s title theme, is ominous. As the traffic courses through the city's concrete veins, the buildings remain immovable, fixing their gaze on the clear night sky as though plotting something beyond the immediate comprehension of the mortal souls who speed feverishly around in their vehicles below.

It becomes quickly apparent from the beginning of *House of Cards* that the president is one of the 'mortal souls', and not among the immovable marble figures that dominate the city's landscape. The programme's focus, Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey), reflective of the pervasive feeling of contemporary mistrust of our politicians, is intent on manipulating and outmanoeuvring the president at every opportunity when his desire for the position of Secretary of State is thwarted. Where Jed Bartlet was the all-knowing philosopher king in *The West Wing*, President Garrett Walker is an unwitting pawn in Underwood's political games. Easily manipulated, he falls for Frank's every trick, clearly unaware that he is being played for a fool. Underwood has no reverence or respect for the president or the office he occupies, viewing him merely as a further barrier to be overcome in his pursuit of ultimate control. In a period in which the president seems powerless to control events despite continuing to present the impression that he is capable of doing so, *House of Cards* portrays the president as almost meaningless in the acquisition and execution of political power. This is achieved by consistently framing the president from distance and mediating him through screens – this is how he is first seen on election night [Figure 1], and later when delivering his inaugural address [Figures 2 and 3].



[Figure 1]



[Figure 2]



[Figure 3]

House of Cards positions President Walker as significant, but only in terms of his image – as Underwood says of him, by winning 40 million votes he has “tapped into something” and has

“that winning smile, those trusting eyes”. He functions almost as a glorified spokesperson: all the real power and action happens elsewhere and he simply delivers the news, reflecting contemporary impressions of the president as a mere pawn for corporate and other special interests.

House of Cards’ fascination with Underwood’s Machiavellian manipulations of the democratic process does not, however, undermine its clear project to critique the institution of the presidency in the contemporary period. While one might have expected Underwood to have things all his own way when he finally muscles Walker out of position and secures the highest office in the land at the conclusion of the show’s second season, the programme’s preoccupation with the declining power of the presidency persists. In keeping with Obama’s own trials and tribulations, these assaults on presidential power emerge from home and abroad: Underwood’s flagship domestic programme, America Works, a project similar to the New Deal in appearance (if not reality, as it entails a slashing of Social Security) designed to combat unemployment, is heavily opposed by many in his own party and, in a further (partial) mirroring of reality, he comes up against an unreasonable bully in the shape of Russian President Petrov (Lars Mikkelsen), who continually undermines Underwood’s attempt to maintain peace in the Middle East. Although Underwood still manages to maintain his power by employing the kinds of dirty tricks that would have made Nixon blush, it is clear that he is an ‘imperial’ president in a post-imperial world.

Underwood’s declining influence once he becomes president is reflected by the fact that the visual signature which dominated the first two seasons (and the original UK drama) - Underwood’s Shakespearean soliloquys direct to camera – are employed considerably less frequently in the third season: in the first two seasons, when Underwood was manipulating his way towards power, the confessions appear gleefully malevolent, as if the audience are being offered a privileged perspective on the dirty tricks necessary to win power. The show delights in exploring the remorseless path to dominance. Come the third season – Underwood’s first year in office as president - they are far fewer in number, and often simple looks to camera to express frustration and annoyance. Stylistically, this is intriguing: *The West Wing*’s visual signature, enshrined in popular culture as the dynamic walk-and-talk Steadicam shot through the corridors of power, was designed to equate the presidency with a robust, forceful, in-control masculinity, creating a unity between presidential words, actions and visual style. This was most apparent when the device was absent: when statically framed or subjected to a handheld style, it inevitably reflected Bartlet’s impotence and uncertainty

(particularly in the show's later seasons, as the terrorist threat becomes graver and Bartlet's multiple sclerosis worsens). The visualisation of power in *House of Cards* is less grandiose: Underwood cultivates his power through collusion, manipulation, and calculation; it is often his manipulation of *language* rather than of visuals that enables him to maintain control. When this is absent, the silence that accompanies his looks to the camera render his impotence even more apparent. This could be explained by the fact that, as president, Underwood no longer enjoys the kind of privacy he did previously, which might partially explain the decline in the use of this device. More compellingly, potentially, is the notion that Underwood is uncomfortable with the increased level of magnification of his personality and (personal) history now that he is president.

Indeed, this reading is given more weight by Underwood's decision to sell America Works to the citizens by hiring a bestselling novelist, Tom Yates (Paul Sparks), to write a treatise on the philosophical underpinnings of the project. Yates' book metamorphoses into a close analysis of Underwood's early life and relationship with his wife, Claire (Robin Wright). Yates hits upon Underwood's insecurities about his working-class background, and reveals the resentments and jealousies that have built up over their twenty-seven year marriage which culminate in Claire leaving Underwood at the end of the third season. It becomes apparent that Yates has provided some home truths with which the Underwoods are not comfortable: he describes their relationship as "a cold fusion of two universal elements, identical in weight, equal in force. United they stand. A union like none other. The unsplittable atom of American politics." Claire begins to realise that, after thirty years, it might be *all* there is; their marriage has been a sham, a union born of political convenience and mutual ambition. This relationship has been largely window-dressing, a 'house of cards', if you will, destined to collapse at some stage. Underwood fires Yates, citing the fact that the book does not appear to be 'about' America Works as he had so desired, but rather a psychological biography about his marriage. In so doing, he reveals a key about the show's attitude towards the presidency in the contemporary period.

As I have discussed elsewhere in relation to *The West Wing*, this kind of close inspection is uniquely uncomfortable for presidents because of the liminal space they are supposed to occupy: they are positioned consistently between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary', 'man' and 'superman', flesh-and-blood and stone building. In *The West Wing*, Bartlet is able to resolve the tension he feels between these two competing configurations of himself by undergoing psychotherapy and dealing with the ways in which his complex relationship with

his deceased father is impacting his presidency. In essence, Bartlet must nullify his father's influence and embrace his intellectualism in order to succeed as president. Bartlet ultimately succeeds, and in doing so, secures a second term. Underwood, at the conclusion of season three, appears entirely unwilling to undergo the same process. It would seem the primary reason for this is that Underwood thinks he will not stand up to scrutiny, as a man or as president. Indeed, the final episode of the third season appears to create a problematic equivalence between Underwood's unwillingness (or inability) to perform a traditional, authoritarian brand of masculinity as a husband, his faltering presidency, and Claire's departure (the show has explored Underwood's possible alternative sexuality, as he sleeps with his secret service agent, and it is implied he had a love affair with a male friend at college, all departing from the presidency's resolutely heterosexual norm in reality and fiction). These three elements function together to articulate the critique of the institution that arguably sits at the centre of *House of Cards*.

Indeed, it seems that challenging Underwood's unwavering belief that he could transcend the hustle and bustle of day-to-day political business to become one of the stone buildings that dots the Washington DC landscape is the key overarching theme in *House of Cards*. Given the intention behind the America Works programme, it is possible that he has designs on becoming a latter-day Franklin D. Roosevelt, a president who rescued the nation's economy from the doldrums, and who is now cast in stone along the edge of Washington DC's tidal basin. Underwood visits this memorial during the third season as he ponders the difficulties he is experiencing in his marriage and his faltering presidency. As he gazes at the statue, he ponders the distance between FDR and his wife, Eleanor, at the memorial (she is tucked away to one side to commemorate her involvement with the early United Nations, another similarity between the Roosevelts and the Underwoods as Claire becomes UN ambassador during her husband's administration). Underwood acknowledges that if he is to become one of the 'stone statues', he will need to heal the distance between himself and his wife, whose support is so crucial to his presidency. What he does not appear to acknowledge, however, is that the nature of the presidency and political power has changed to such an extent that he is unlikely to ever achieve this transcendence.

Underwood's obsession with becoming one of these stone statues is underlined by his disparaging remarks about Remy Danton (Maher Shala Ali), his former press secretary who left the public sector to become a corporate lobbyist:

He chose money over power. In this town, a mistake nearly everyone makes. Money is the McMansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years, power is the old stone building that stands for centuries. I cannot respect someone who does not see the difference.

Underwood clearly considers himself worthy of such a position. However, what is intriguing is that *House of Cards* positions the ‘old stone buildings’ that dot the landscape of Washington DC as icons of the nation’s former glories: it is readily apparent that nobody, Underwood included, will be one day rendered in marble, fixing their gaze on the hustle and bustle of politics. As the promotional material for the show’s first season attests, Underwood may envision himself as Lincoln (with blood on his hands), sitting on his throne and surveying all before him, but he remains flesh and blood. The nature of political power in the contemporary period is of furious speed, chaos and continual crisis management. There is little or no opportunity to ‘build’ something long-lasting, even permanent. Indeed, the rhetoric of ‘impermanence’ pervades the show’s third season, in stark contrast to Underwood’s affirmation of his belief in power being like a ‘stone building’. The White House is visited by Tibetan monks who, as part of a cultural exchange, begin constructing a *mandala*, a complex pattern rendered in coloured sand that is meant to effect purification and healing. Once completed, the *mandala* is consecrated and then wiped away, the granules dispersed in flowing water to signify the transient nature of existence. Claire is preoccupied with the *mandala* throughout the monks’ visit, and gazes upon a picture of it as she contemplates her decision to leave Underwood [Figure 4].

While the temporary nature of the pattern is no doubt intended as a reflection of the Underwoods’ relationship, the complex intertwining of personal and political relationships in *House of Cards* suggests this be read as a reflection on the nature of political power too. It is clear from the representation of politics in *House of Cards* that power is imperfect, impermanent, messy and compromised, and the belief that the brilliant, manipulative individual could transcend this miasma is revealed to be entirely absurd: it is *impossible* for one person on a daily basis to outwit a hostile and often hysterical media, the bitter, jealous rivalries that exist in all branches of government, as well as successfully manage personal relationships. This is reaffirmed by the perceived fact that Underwood will lose the election without Claire because of her obvious popularity with the American people: the president is too weak and unappealing to succeed on his own (this is also explored in the fourth season, where Underwood’s confidence is restored following a repair of relations with Claire, and

because he implements illegal surveillance technology to win the election). Although wildly different, *House of Cards*' presidency requires just as much external support to survive as is required in *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down*.

Scandal tackles similar themes to *House of Cards*, although its flippant and light-hearted tone could not be more different. However, while the former is concerned with the ability of a human president to achieve legendary status, the latter returns to an issue that dominated discourse surrounding Bill Clinton's presidency in the 1990s: the dichotomy between the president as an office and as a man. This troublesome duality was thoroughly explored in *The American President*, where President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas), a widower in his first term as president, embarks on a love affair with environmental lobbyist Sidney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening). In keeping with the period's vicious partisanship, the Republicans make life miserable for Shepherd, whose attempts at having a 'normal' relationship are consistently undermined. The trouble for Shepherd, quite aside from the opposition, is that the phallic trappings of the presidency that surround him – Air Force One, Marine One, the White House itself – make it impossible for Wade to view him as an ordinary man. He is, ultimately, able to overcome this uncomfortable distinction, and succeed as the film's romantic hero, simultaneously rescuing his relationship and his presidency. However, *Scandal*'s President Thomas Fitzgerald Grant III (Tony Goldwyn) finds the resolution of this conflict to be impossible (indeed, the show's increasingly convoluted narrative structure is dependent upon this), and in so doing, speaks profoundly to contemporary perceptions of the presidency.

The programme follows Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) and her associates – they are professional 'fixers' – as they solve political problems (covering up murder and infidelity, primarily) for the rich and powerful in ways that grow increasingly far-fetched as the series proceeds. The salient detail to know about Olivia, however, is that she is having an affair with President Grant. The programme's narrative thrust is dependent upon the push-pull of this relationship, as it is continually thwarted, denied and pushed back as Grant (and Pope) are forced to choose between their sexual desire for one another and the responsibilities of the presidency. Grant, a socially liberal Republican, comes from a very wealthy background and a political dynasty. However, he was unable to win the election without electoral fraud perpetrated by his Chief of Staff, his wife, a Supreme Court justice and Olivia herself (something he does not discover until much later). He is also often kept in the dark about some of the more extreme lengths this group go to in order to cover this up. It also becomes

apparent quite quickly that he never really wanted to be president, but only did so to best his father who had coveted the position his whole life. Like President Garrett in *House of Cards*, President Grant is often little more than the handsome spokesperson for an entirely corrupt system of government.

Indeed, *Scandal* is also a product of the post-Snowden environment in which it is apparent that there are forces far greater and malevolent than the president at work behind the scenes. As with the source of his first electoral victory, Grant is often clueless of the ways in which this system works: the show's narrative is dominated by the actions of B-613, a top secret division of the Central Intelligence Agency, headed by Olivia Pope's father, Eli (Joe Morton). Although Grant attempts to exert control over Eli and the CIA, he is consistently outmanoeuvred. He fires Eli, but he restores himself as Command of B-613. Eli murders Grant's son, the national trauma of which secures Grant's re-election. It is clear that, every step of the way, Eli is more powerful than Grant: *he* is in control of everything, despite Grant's frequent protestations that he is 'Leader of the Free World'. This culminates in a characteristically hyperbolic exchange between the two men, which coalesces around a challenge to the president's masculinity: Eli accuses him of being nothing more than a "boy", the entitled, spoiled offspring of a political dynasty who has never had to work for anything in his whole life, who views Olivia as his "way out" of a job he was pushed into pursuing by his father. While Bartlet in *The West Wing* sought to resolve the conflict with his deceased father in order to accept fully the responsibilities of the presidency, Grant has seemingly no interest in doing so. Throughout, he is presented as 'not man enough' for the position, a boy unwilling to make sacrifices for the nation.

However, *Scandal* is one of the first fictional presidencies that openly discusses whether the demands of the job, and the compromises you have to make and the crimes you have to commit while doing it, are actually worth it. In the show's second season, Fitz's devotion to Olivia bubbles over and represents a development of the man/president dichotomy that was all-pervasive in the 1990s. In an extraordinary moment in presidential fiction, the traditional figuration of the president as the one who is lusted after, the object of desire, is transformed, and he becomes the floundering, lovesick, slightly hysterical mess: Grant breaks down crying in front of Olivia, yelping, "You own *me*! You control *me*! I belong to *you*! You think I don't want to be a better man?" This rather reinforces his boyishness; his hopeless infatuation prevents him from performing his duty and serving the nation. But, perhaps even more significantly, *Scandal* demonstrates that being president and

being an ordinary man are mutually exclusive: Grant cannot be a good president *and* a good man; his love for Olivia means it has to be one or the other. While this is obvious in real life for anyone who followed the political career of Bill Clinton, this represents something of a shift in popular representation, particularly Grant's near willingness to give everything up for love. In this regard he is more similar to King Edward VIII, who gave up similar power to marry Wallis Simpson (such a comparison arguably reaffirms Grant's status as American aristocracy). While on the one hand this could be interpreted as the recycling of a fairly conventional trope of romantic fiction that enacts the tension between personal desire and responsibility, it is crucial that the presidency has not previously been positioned in this way. In the past, whether action hero or romantic lead, the presidency was always worth keeping hold of because of its power to do good things. Here, Grant's ambivalence about the position represents a new development. The common battle to unite the president's 'two bodies' may not actually be worth it because, as demonstrated by the power wielded by Olivia's father and the manipulation and malfeasance that was required to get Grant into his position, the institution is actually incapable of achieving anything of significance. At the time of speaking, Grant remains in the position (no doubt owing to the popularity of the show and the narrative demands of a melodramatic structure in which fulfilment of one's desire is continuously delayed), but for this conversation to be had in popular fiction indicates the extent to which the perceptions of the presidency's power have been somewhat undermined.

Conclusion

I write from the perspective of the 2016 presidential campaign, which has been dominated by anxieties of 'declinism': the growing acceptance that the United States' brief period as an unchallenged superpower is at a definitive end; that it is more susceptible to the political and economic turbulence in the rest of the world, that its military cannot solve every problem, and the president, the figurehead to whom people have looked to provide some sense that the possibility of solutions do exist, is incapable of doing so: in a fraught geopolitical environment and in a domestic scene crippled by partisanship, many of the US's most pressing concerns seem destined to remain as such. Two of the frontline candidates for the presidency in 2016, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, are indicative of this anxiety. They reflect the widespread distrust of politicians, as they campaign on anti-politics, anti-establishment tickets in an attempt to appear authentic, unvarnished conduits for the will of

the people, channelling a powerful but imagined nostalgia for the stability, purity and purpose of an earlier period. Offering bewilderingly simple solutions to the enormously complex problems that face the United States in the post-9/11, post-recession era (in Sanders' case, the ideological purity of the 'true progressive', taking aim at the multinational corporations and the wealthiest one percent of Americans, and Trump's desire to retrench the progress made by every major political movement since the 1960s in order to 'make America great again') feels, sounds and looks like a Hollywood movie taking place in front of our eyes. There was once a time when film and television provided the necessary release of pressure for our dissatisfaction with reality, indulging our desire for 'fantasy' candidates who speak from their hearts in a fictional world where compromise is relegated to the background and clarity and purity wins the day. It seems now that the reverse is true: while 'real' presidential candidates preach that the office can change the world and 'make America great again', popular culture expresses, if not the opposite, then certainly severe doubt that this is a believable, and achievable, goal.

All of the examples here indicate that the popular perception of the presidency retains a symbolic significance but that it is in decline. In *Scandal*, the designation of the president as the 'Leader of the Free World' is repeatedly reiterated, so much so that it betrays a certain level of anxiety about the sturdiness of this construct. Anne Norton (1993) argued that the president's function is "first semiotic, and only secondarily executive" (87). This chapter has demonstrated that the semiotics of the contemporary popular cultural presidency have shifted to such an extent that the figure is now realised through archetypes unimaginable in previous decades: the president is now the damsel-in-distress, the sidekick, the impotent tyrant, and the love interest. He is no longer the hero: that designation can only be left to others if, indeed, it is possible at all. What is somewhat disturbing is that this perceived 'lack' within the presidency is still so preoccupied with traditional conceptualisations of masculinity: the president is 'rescued' by a rearticulation of the 1980s 'hard bodied' lummo in *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House Down*; he is unable, in the manner of the heroic individual, to transcend the backstabbing and manipulation in American government to achieve anything worthwhile in *House of Cards*; he is reduced to the status of a lovesick boy who has little concept of what is going on in his own White House in *Scandal*. There is no doubt that, based on the construction of the presidents in the examples discussed, that the presidency is a symbol in dire need of support, a figure who has been reduced to either glorified

spokesperson or victim of terrorist attack in need of rescue, reliant upon huge amounts of legal and illegal support to make him president and keep him there.

Works Cited

Barger, Harold M. "The Incredible Shrinking Image: From Cold War to Globalist Presidency". In *The Post Cold-War Presidency*, edited by Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Glenn P. Hastedt, 57-80. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.

Frame, Gregory. *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014.

Fuchs, Cynthia J. "The Buddy Politic". In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, 194-212. London: Routledge, 1993.

Guerrero, Ed. "The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood's Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties". In *Black American Cinema*, edited by Manthia Diawara, 237-46. London: Routledge, 1993.

Jeffords, Susan. "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties". In *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins, 196-208. London: Routledge, 1993.

Mardell, Mark. "Obama's Presidency: Decline in the Fall?". *BBC News*, September 19, 2013, accessed April 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-24155464>

Norton, Anne. *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Orman, John. *Comparing Presidential Behavior: Carter, Reagan and the Macho Presidential Style*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

Roddick, Nick. "Only the stars survive: disaster movies in the seventies". In *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, edited by David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt, 243-71. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1980.

Rose, Richard. *The Postmodern President: George Bush Meets the World*. New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, 1991. Second edition.

Films and Television Programmes Cited.

Air Force One. Director: Wolfgang Petersen, 1997.

All the President's Men. Director: Alan J Pakula, 1976.

The American President. Director: Rob Reiner, 1995.

Deep Impact. Director: Mimi Leder, 1998.

House of Cards. Creator: Beau Willimon, 2012- .

Independence Day. Director: Roland Emmerich, 1996.

Lethal Weapon 2. Director: Richard Donner, 1989.

Olympus Has Fallen. Director: Antoine Fuqua, 2013.

Scandal. Creator: Shonda Rhimes, 2012- .

The Sentinel. Director: Clark Johnson, 2006.

Shooter. Director: Antoine Fuqua, 2007.

24. Creator: Joel Surnow, 2001-2010.

2012. Director: Roland Emmerich, 2009.

Vantage Point. Director: Pete Travis, 2008.

The West Wing. Creator: Aaron Sorkin, 1999-2006.

White House Down. Director: Roland Emmerich, 2013.